

## Preventing Gallstones: Lose Weight, But Eat Some Fat

**Q.** A friend recently had her gallbladder removed because of gallstones. How can I avoid a similar problem?

**A.** It's smart to think about prevention, because an estimated 20 million Americans either have gallstones or have had their gallbladders removed. Older women who are overweight are most at risk. And yet most people who have gallstones—solid clumps made mostly of cholesterol—don't even know they have them. If they don't cause symptoms, there's no need for treatment.

However, one of every five people with stones do have symptoms, such as right-sided abdominal and shoulder pain, nausea and vomiting, and indigestion after high-fat meals. If the stones cause inflammation and severe pain, surgery may be recommended.

**What Gall!** The gallbladder is a small sac located on the right side of the abdomen under the ribcage. It is connected to the liver and the small intestine by ducts. The gallbladder's purpose is to store and release bile, a thick mixture of cholesterol, bile salts and pigments produced by the liver to aid digestion. Eating stimulates the gallbladder to con-

tract and squirt the bile through the ducts into the intestine, where the bile salts help digest fat.

Why do stones form? If there is more cholesterol than the bile salts can dissolve, hard crystals form that eventually turn into stones. Gallstones may also develop if the gallbladder does not contract completely or often enough to empty the bile it contains. This may occur, ironically, if you eat too little fat or go for long periods of time without food.

Gallstones can be the size of a grain of sand or the size of a golf ball. Small gallstones simply exit the body via the intestines without incident. However, if a large stone gets stuck in a bile duct and blocks the flow of bile into the intestine, you'll feel the telltale severe abdominal pain and your gallbladder will become inflamed. Rarely, the pancreas becomes inflamed too. Jaundice, fever and chills may also occur. Stones don't always lead to inflammation, but an inflamed gallbladder is almost always caused by stones.

**Can Diet Help?** According to a recent review in the *Journal of the American College of Nutrition*, most studies have found that both refined sugar and satu-

rated fat increase risk of gallstones, while fiber and moderate alcohol consumption reduce risk. Excessive alcohol, however, can lead to cirrhosis of the liver, which can also trigger gallstones. In the Nurses' Health Study, women who ate the most nuts and vegetable protein, beans and soy were less likely to need gallbladder surgery than women who ate the least. And some studies suggest that coffee may offer protection from gallstones.

**EN's Bottom Line.** The same healthy lifestyle that reduces the risk of chronic diseases like heart disease and cancer may also protect against gallstones. Here are EN's healthy gallbladder tips:

- Maintain a healthy weight, but do not drastically cut calories to lose weight.
- Exercise regularly.
- Choose plant foods often, especially fiber-rich vegetables, fruit, whole grains and nuts.
- Limit refined sweets.
- Cut back on, but don't cut out fat.
- Drink alcohol in moderation—no more than one drink a day for women, two for men.

## A Closer Look at Whether Two Calcium Supplements Make the Grade

**Q.** You recently compared several different brands of calcium-containing bone supplements, but you didn't mention *Os-Cal* or *Citracal*. Aren't these good sources of supplemental calcium?

**A.** Yes, they are, but there are dozens of brands of calcium-containing bone supplements on the market, often with several different forms and formulas within each brand. Caplets, tablets, chewables, even liquids and a calcium gum are now available. EN's roundup of supplements barely scratched the surface of what's available, but did highlight some of those we found to be the most complete.

*Os-Cal* and *Citracal*, both leading brands of calcium supplements, differ in their sources of calcium and cost. *Os-Cal*, which comes from oyster shells, costs a little less than *Citracal*, which is made from calcium citrate.

**Lead Score.** In the late 1990's, lead was found in some calcium supplements derived from natural sources, such as

bone meal, dolomite and oyster shells. For that reason, EN has urged avoidance of these calcium sources. A recent study found that after testing 136 natural calcium supplements for lead, there was significantly less in lead in oyster shell supplements compared to previous reports. All but one brand tested were found to be within safe federal limits. But EN still believes the risk of lead—dangerous in any amount because it accumulates in the body—outweighs choosing calcium supplements from natural sources.

*Citracal* is sometimes touted as providing superior absorption compared to other forms of calcium, but noted expert Robert Heaney, M.D., maintains that there's little difference among forms. What's more important is that you remember to take your bone supplement regularly. Also, dividing your doses into two or more per day (no more than 500 to 600 milligrams per dose) and taking them with meals will aid absorption of most calcium. *Citracal* can be taken between meals.

Most important, many calcium supplements are not complete bone supplements—only two of seven *Os-Cal* and *Citracal* products EN reviewed include magnesium and vitamin D. D is critical for calcium absorption, and magnesium is an important bone-building mineral that helps make up the bone matrix.

**EN's Bottom Line.** Bone supplements are just that—supplements to your diet. Rely first on calcium-rich foods, like reduced-fat dairy products, broccoli, collards, kale, canned sardines and salmon (with bones) and dried figs.

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